Epitome : International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
ISSN : 2395-6968

FEMINISM, WOMEN AND SCIENCE FICTION OF OCTAVIA BUTLER

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ABSTRACT

Science Fiction is a distinguished literary form and not a branch of science. SF has tried to make sense of the rapidity of technological change and the impact which science and technology have made on our society. By imagining other worlds and possible futures, the genre allows us to view our present day situation with greater detachment and perspective. An exploration of the tradition of SF literature by women writers is a kind of tribute to the literate convictions—both writers and readers—that fuel the emerging voices of SF. Despite a long tradition of women's reading and writing in the field of literature in general and science fiction in particular only in the last four decades women writers of SF became fortunate to receive extensive scholarly attention. SF women writers like Octavia Butler and Le Guin, in a pragmatic way, have forged a path for safeguarding the existential interests of humanity in future. Viewed the tradition of SF from women's point of view one understands that in spite of the rich contribution of women writers, this kind of genre of SF still suffers the malady of phallocentric subsumption. SF reflected in male tradition explores and exploits science as a mode of power, politics, domination, destruction, and violence. Women, on the contrary, perceive the scientific truth as the means of reconstructing human society in positive terms regarding constructive change, growth and all-round sound development unto this last. The space of dominance and violence of men SF is replaced by women SF writers with space for harmony, co-ordination, and humaneness.

KEYWORDS

Phallocentric subsumption, symbionts, sexual-textual politics, thought-experimentation, extraterrestrials, human/alien sexual encounters

RESEARCH PAPER

> Science fiction has long treated people who might or might not exist – extraterrestrials. Unfortunately, however, many of the same science fiction writers who started us thinking about the possibility of extraterrestrial life did nothing to make us think about here-at-home human variation.
>
> – Octavia E. Butler

> If science fiction has a major gift to offer literature, I think it is just this: the capacity to face an open universe. Physically open, psychically open. No doors shut. What science, from physics and astronomy to history and psychology, has given us is the open universe: a cosmos that is not a simple, fixed hierarchy, but an immensely complex process in time. All the doors stand open, from the prehuman past through the incredible present to the terrible and hopeful future. All connections are possible. All alternatives are thinkable. It is not a comfortable, reassuring place. It's a very large house, a very drafty house. But it's the house we live in.
>
> – Ursula K. Le Guin

Women writers in the field of literature in general and science fiction in particular have been playing a substantial role. Less known, less read, less well-read, less explored, less well-explored, less taught, less well-taught, less interpreted, less well-interpreted, less analyzed, less well-analyzed, less evaluated, less well-evaluated, less criticized, less well-criticized, less appreciated, less well-appreciated, less examined, less well-examined and more readily dismissed by the ideologically greedy political critics, the tradition of science fiction by women writers like Octavia Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, and others is quite rich, diverse, varied, often neglected and out of the domain of the ideological, phallocentric critical scrutiny. Science fiction literature is the offspring of both men and women writers. Women have been the grandmothers and mothers of science fiction right from beginning to the present time. Whether folklores, folktales, folk literature, diaries, advice books, epic pomes, travelogues, lullabies, scriptures, songs, essays, short stories, treatises, imaginary or nonfictional writings, dramas, prose or poetry, literary criticism, scientific-philosophical-ideological treatises, theories, encyclopedias, and even science fiction literature women have contributed abundantly to the intellectual output as both producers and consumers, writers and readers as well. Women have been an important stakeholders and essential parts of the cycles of the production, circulation, distribution, and

consumption of literature in general and SF in particular. Actually women have been a part of SF since its beginning, but their role until recent times was relatively minor, barring a few exceptions. In the literary history of science fiction, women writers are deliberately neglected. In fact SF history is full of politics and power and a matter of choice. Louise Berinkow (1974:3) very aptly unveils the politics in literary history:

> Literary history is a matter of power, not justice…what is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices. Which writers have survived their time and which have not depends upon who noticed them and chose to record the notice. Which works have become part of the canon of literature, read, thought about, discussed, and which have disappeared depends, in the same way, on the process of selection and power to select.

Science the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818, women have been writing thought experimented SF stories, novels, poetry, drama and in all the forms of literature for the emancipation and empowerment of women in particular and the upliftment of common lives unto this last in general. Women SF writers have been leading common readers on an archetypal journey from "vial to vision," "darkness to light," "innocence to experience," "mere animals to rational human beings" through their corpus of thought experimented SF. The result is that science fiction literature after a long journey through wilderness finally entered into a Garden of Eden. The specificity of the SF of women writers is that they have transcended the shorelines of the genre of SF and produced literature full of thought experiments which has enriched SF literature. Cathy N. Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin (1995: vii) in this regard make an important observation:

> Women writers have worked in a remarkable variety of forms, breaking down traditional boundaries between popular and elite forms of writing, and exploring new topics and areas that previously had not been considered "legitimate" topics for literature.

Precisely because of the boundary-breaking nature of women's writing the SF tradition of women has become quite varied, exclusive, thought experimented, open and even distinguished and different from the male SF tradition. Women writers of SF exploited the "Derridian Deconstruction" and questioned, interrogated, defeated and even reexamined, redefined literary history of science fiction from a diversity of female and feminist perspectives by challenging the

traditional and phallocentric historiography: stereotyped images, male-centered ideologies, sexual-textual politics, politics of interpretation in criticism and theory, categories, genres, theories, periods, cannons and the great traditions including their makers. The SF writing by women writers has been accepted, recognized and praised by readers, critics, theorists and academicians all over the world. The SF tradition of women writers have now well-settled with its own name and fame, identity, ideas, networks, criticism, anthologies, journals, magazines, book reviews, workshops, organizations, and gynology. The SF tradition of women which began with the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818 continues with the contribution of new generation of women as beautiful, bright, glorious and sublime as the twinkle stars in the sky with its own beauty, bounty and light. The very things for which the seminal voices of SF fought are what the current generation of SF women writers can often take for granted in their own occupation and battlefield.

Hailed as the first African-American woman science fiction writer, Octavia Estelle Butler (1947–2006) brought a unique perspective to the science fiction genre by providing vision of a millennial world. She was the first black woman to come to international prominence as a SF writer. Incorporating powerful, spare language and rich, well-developed characters, her work tackled race, gender, religion, poverty, power, politics, and science in a way that touched readers of all backgrounds. Her twelve novels and volume of short stories garnered her numerous awards, including the MacArathur Foundation Fellowship, MacArathur "Genious grant," both the Hugo and Nebula awards, the Langston Hughes Medal, and a PEN Lifetime Achievement award. Butler's SF novels include the Patternist series; *Patternmaster* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1077), *Survivor* (1978), *Wild Seed* (1080), and *Clay's Ark* (1984). These works, and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989), explore the complex power relationships between human beings and extraterrestrials and feature such science-fiction themes as genetic engineering and human/alien sexual encounters. *Kindred* (1979) projects a twentieth century African American woman into the past as a free black woman in the nineteenth century slaveholding South. *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), based on parables from the biblical *New Testament*, portray a dystopic America of the twenty-first century in which social issues such as gang warfare, drug abuse, environmental destruction, racism, and religious fanaticism are carried to their extremes.

Fledgling (2005) tells the story of the Ina, an ancient, vampire-like race that takes human beings as symbionts.

Octavia Butler's SF draws on African-American history and explores material future societies. She addresses issues of racism in *Kindred*, and of women's political activism against right wing fundamentalists in the Earthseed series – *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). In *Fleadgling* (2005) a dire need of re-understanding life is presented. But right from her earliest SF novel *Pattermmaster* (1976), with its use of telepathy, Butler has shown an acute interest in configuring processes of knowing divergent from logocentrism, in the unconscious and in desire. In the *Xenogenesis* series Butler uses the trope of the alien to explore how otherness and difference can problematise both gender and ethnicity. She points out the subtle relationships between science and women. Black women usually are at the centre of her novels, but around them Butler develops a wide variety of characters. Butler is interested in the relationships of men and women, children and parents, masters and slaves, inferiors and superiors as revealed in struggles for great power and for survival, and in how even under these great stresses human values can develop and prevail. Butler has specialized in metaphors that dramatize the tyranny of one species or race or gender over another. But her work does not read like fiction composed by agenda. White writers, she has pointed out, tend to include black characters in science fiction only to illustrate a problem or as signposts to advertise the writer's distaste for racism; black people in most science fiction are represented as "other." Butler makes this analysis of the assumption that characters in science fiction need to be identified as black only when race is an overt issue in the narrative. In an interview with Rosalie G. Harrison (1980:32-33) Butler states:

> What it really means is that to be black is to be abnormal. The norm is white, apparently in the view of people who see things in that way. For them the only reason you would introduce a black character is to introduce this kind of abnormality. Usually, it's because you're telling a story about racism or at least about race…..What I want to do is pull in some good black writers who will write about black people and not just about how terrible it is to be hated.

Octavia Butler's all SF novels stand in quiet resistance to the notion that a black character in a science fiction novel is there for a reason. In Butler's novel the black protagonist is there, stands like a mountain. She does not hesitate to harness the power of fiction as fable to create

striking analogies to the oppressive realities of our own present world. Butler also peoples her imagined worlds with black characters as a matter of course. Events and lives are usually in crisis in her books, but she celebrates racial difference.

In *Kindred* Butler has blended slave narrative, slave-memoir, autobiographical narrative, scientific fantasy and science fiction into a random whole. Throughout this novel, Butler describes how the imprint of slavery is carried not only in the minds but also on the bodies of all African Americans, as symbolized in the novel by Dana's loss of an arm during her ordeal. Divided into six chapters – "The River", "The Fire", "The Fall", "The Fight", "The Storm" and, "The Rope", with a prologue and an epilogue, the novel, *Kindred* fictionalizes the need for cultural and historical knowledge in order to survive in a modern world. It is a story of Dana, a twentieth century California writer who works at menial jobs assigned by a temporary agency who is married to Kevin, a white man. In the novel, time and again, Dana is transported in time and space to a plantation in nineteenth century Maryland to save the life of Rufus, the son of the plantation owner. Dana learns, through genealogical research, that Refus is her ancestor, and unless she assures his survival to father the child who will known as Hagar, Dana herself well never be born. During Dana's journeys into the past, Refus grows from a young child to adulthood; however, elapsed time in Dana's twentieth century life ranges only from a few seconds to eight days due to the relative time travel technique adopted by Dana. At the conclusion of the novel Dana stabs Rufus to death to save herself from the attempted rape. Having assured her own survival, Dana returns to the twentieth century but not unscathed. She bears the scars of two beatings and has lost part of her arm during her ordeal. Octavia Butler by depicting a woman's successful quest presents important themes such as sexism, growth into a self-in-community, historical education. Thus the novel, *Kindred* explores the character of Edana and through her character successfully illustrated stages of the historically grounded female quest: "The decision to investigate the historical past, difficulties in assimilating it, and the purposeful incorporation of historical past into the present self" (Kubitschek 1991: 69).

Butler has black women as protagonists but it is also important that there are always numbers of black characters in her novels. There is enough of a critical mass of racial and sexual and cultural diversity in any Butler novel to make radiant it practicing science fiction writer. One of the exciting features of *Kindred* as pointed out by Robert Crossley (1988: xiii) "is that so much of the novel is attentive not to the *exceptional* situation of an isolated modern black woman

in a white household under slavery but to her complex social and psychological relationships with the community of black slaves she joins." Despite the severe stresses under which they live, the slaves constitute a rich human society: Dana's proud and vulnerable ancestor Alice Greenwood; the mute housemaid Carrie; Sarah, young Nigel, whom Dana teaches to read from a stolen primer; Sam James the field hand, who begs Dana to teach his brother and sister; Alice's husband Isaac, mutilated and sold to Mississippi after a failed escape attempt; even Liza the swing woman, who betrays Dana to the master and is punished by the other slaves for her complicity with the white owners. Although the black community is persistently fractured by the sudden removal of its members through either the calculated strategy or the mere whim of their white controllers, that community always patches itself back together, drawing from its common suffering and common anger, a common strength. It is the white characters in the novel who seem odd, isolated, pathetic, alien, and problematic. More consistently than any other black writer, Butler has deployed the genre's conventions to tell stories with a political and sociological edge to them. These stories speak to issues, feelings, and historical truths arising out of African-American experience. Butler transcended the shorelines of feminism and provided freedom and cultural pluralism unto this last. Robert Crossley (1979: xvii) rightly states:

> In centering her fiction on women who lack power, suffer abuse, and are committed to claiming power over their own lives and to exercising that power harshly when necessary, Butler has not merely used SF as a "feminist didactic," in Beverly Friend's term, but she has generated her fiction out of a black feminist aesthetic. Her novels pointedly expose various chauvinisms (sexual, racial, and cultural), are enriched by a historical consciousness that shapes the depiction of enslavement both in the real past and in imaginary pasts and futures, and enact struggles for personal freedom and cultural pluralism.

Kindred has enriched the tradition of the African-American women's novel. By and large *Kindred,* as a best specimen of science fiction, is a critique of slavery. "Butler makes new and eloquent use of a familiar science-fiction idea, protecting one's own past, to express the tangled interdependency of black and white in the United States," Joanna Russ wrote in the 1980s issue of *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (*Matthews 2006: 582).Williams called *Kindred* "a startling and engrossing commentary on the complex actuality and continuing heritage of American slavery" (*Ibid.*).

Xenogenesis series is about the intricate web of power and affection in the relationships between human beings and alien species. *Dawn,* (1987) Octavia Butler's seventh novel and the first in the *Xenogenesis* series, introduces new possibilities in the scientific realm of genetic arrangement coupled with observations about the conflicts between the sexes and racial groups. The novel describes a post-nuclear holocaust world in which all life is valued. Its text place in the future, 250 years after a global nuclear war has made earth inhabitable. It explores the complex power-relationships between human beings and extraterrestrials and presents the consequences of science and technology, particularly genetic engineering on the lives of earthly people particularly women. Divided into four sections – "Womb," "Family," "Nursery," and "The Training Floor" – it chronicles the non-traditional science-fiction heroine's (a black woman's) rebirth, development, and adjustment to a foreign environment. In *Dawn* Butler seems to want to suggest that gene swapping is the answer to the problems of a hierarchical species – the characteristic from which sexual and racial prejudices grow with their accompanying oligarchy. What is and remains a hallmark of her work is her deftness at creating the sensual, vis-à-vis unlikely, male/female alliances. Lilith, the heroine, is independent, intelligent, capable, and, in most instances, disliked by her peers – the epitome of heroic womanism. It is easy for the reader to sympathize with her quest for autonomy in the environment of aliens. Again we see Butler's signature – a black heroine trust into unusual circumstances and compelled to survive. Through the character of Lilith Octavia Butler very effectively fictionalized black women's quest for their being. *Dawn* ends with Lilith's enforced pregnancy from the mixed seed of her human and Oankali mates. Thus it envisions creating nonpatriarchal, nongendered society.

Adulthood Rites (1988), the second novel in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, chronicles Akin Iyapo's development into adulthood. Akin, the son of Lilith Iyapo, is the first male child born of a human woman on Earth since the war that destroyed Earth some three hundred years before. The Oankali have restored Earth with the aid of genetic engineering. They returned the survivors of the holocaust to Earth to go about the business of gene swapping to form a hybrid of the Oankali and human species. Akin, part human and part Oankali, is bred to become the champion of the resisters. The human beings would remain childless rather than mate with an alien. He declares his life's work to be the restoration and propagation of a wholly human society. Divided into four parts – "Lo," "Phoenix," "Chkahichdahk," and "Home" – the rubrics designate locations where environment significantly contributes to Akin's development. In the

novel Butler present a need to accept differences. Lilith lectures her human/alien hybrid son, Akin to embrace 'difference':

> Human beings fear difference…Oankali craves difference. Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialization…When you feel a conflict [within yourself], try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference (80).

The last sentence might stand as the epigraph for the whole *Xenogensis* trilogy. *Adulthood Rites* is the middle point in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy. Because of this, it serves an important function as a bridge in the development of both character and story. The action of the story begins with the abduction of Akin and ends with an adult Akin, watching from Gabe's shoulder as the city of Phoenix (symbol of hope) burns. The hope for the future of human civilization rests with a black man, who also happens to be alien.

Imago (1989), the last book in the *Xenogenesis* series, tells the story of Jodhas another of Lilith's children. In this novel Butler explores her favorite themes: the reversal of gender roles and the inevitable power struggle between two species that must become interdependent if they are to survive. It is divided into three parts: "Metamorphosis," "Exile," and "Imago." The novel explores how 'otherness and difference' can problematise both gender and ethnicity. In this novel one can witnesses a topsitervidam and deconstruction of the genetic definitions of 'gender' and 'race' based on biological determinism. The narrator, Jodahs, is not only an ooloi construct, but the very first one ever to be born, and hence feared by the Oankali inhabitants of Earth, as a dangerous unknown quantity. Literally constructed by his ooloi parent Nikanj, out of the DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) of his two human parents and his two Oankali parents, Jodahs expects to metamorphose into either an Oankali or a human, of either gender, depending upon which parent he feels most drawn to. Through the creation of this metamorphosis, 'gender' and 'race' have become issues of affinity rather than heredity. The ooloi has hybridized not only race and otherness, but the very genetics that is supposed to underpin those differences, and made adult development a process rather than a fixed given. Ooloi are 'nature genetic engineers' and can change hereditary defects, by altering the genetic make-up. The conflict gene will thus be eradicated in Jodahs' own construct children. By exploiting genetic engineering Butler very skillfully dismisses the so called scientific fixities of western culture. For Ooloi, unlike human beings, there is no mind-body split, they are fully

integrated. Butler rightly points out the difference between human beings and Ooloi:

> Humans said one thing with their bodies and another with their mouths and everyone had to spend time and energy figuring out what they really meant….Nikanj, on the other hand, meant what it said. Its body and its mouth said the same things (27).

The Ooloi preconceives the mind/body, nature/culture binary oppositions, by eradicating the distinctions. Ooloi love life, all life is a treasure to them, and the desire to conjoin with others goes beyond a wish into a bodily need. Butler writes: "An ooloi is probably the strangest thing any human will come into contact with. We need time alone with it to realize it's probably also the best thing" (147). Through this novel Butler fictionalizes unity in diversity by dismissing phallocentrism and other centrism. Merja Makinen (2001:165) rightly states: "*Imago* imagines a world where both difference and desire are uncircumscribed by the culture norms of Western phallocentrism." As the trilogy ends in *Imago* with a product of the exchange between Oankali and human beings that is radically neither, Butler displays her orientation towards evolution seen as non-purposive transformation. By exploring horror and beauty in rare combination, Butler's science fiction texts became exemplary classics of the 1980s decade.

Butler's work, although usually labeled as science fiction, is not easily categorized. She read widely and was especially fascinated by current issues in the biological sciences. Reviewers agree that Butler's attention to the psychological development of her characters distinguishes her work from that of others in the science-fiction genre. Butler told several interviewers that she believed that the conflict between the gift of intelligence and the inborn tendency toward hierarchical behavior is the root of human problems. The central tensions in her artistic vision explore the divisions between rich and poor, male and female, people of different races, and human beings and extraterrestrials. She is unsparing in her descriptions, whether the graphic savagery of a slave whipping or the depraved barbarity of drugged young hooldlums who mutilate and burn their victims. Butler's fiction is skillfully plotted, and although she was not a didactic writer, her work implies a severe criticism of the moral laxity of the contemporary world. Although Butler's African American heritage strongly influenced her writing, she saw racial issues in a wider context, beyond black-white confrontations and even between extraterrestrial and human species. Her positive characters often develop close friendships or sexual ties to those who are "different," in gender, race, sexual orientation, or social class. She

consistently sought a philosophical basis to explore the imperfect world which her characters inhabit. Butler described her writing as a positive obsession and advised young writers to persist in the face of repeated rejection. If civilization is to survive, Butler's work implies, it will be the strong, black feminists such as those who dominate her fiction who will assure society's salvation. However, her artistic vision offers scant hope that human beings can acknowledge the failures of history and build on this understanding unless they make a heroic effort to overcome their flawed nature. Throughout her thought-experimented fictional corpus Butler has provided a vision of a millennial world: change is necessary and balance is essential. Sandra Y. Govan states:

> Butler's appeal as one of the most esteemed science fiction writers of her generation lies not only in her altered or alien landscapes, but in character delineation and the interplay of her motifs as well. From the *Patternist* saga through the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, she confronts issues of gender, power, isolation, alienation, slavery, survival, control, change, compromise, adaptation, and difference. Butler also uses such social sciences as anthropology, political science, and sociobiology. She borrows from the physical sciences as well, emphasizing biology and genetic engineering, symbiosis, and human mutation. She also manipulates the pseudosciences – parapsychology, psionic ability, telepathy, and telekinesis, yet throughout her differing, largely dystopian, futures, several characteristics remain virtual constants – strong women of African-American or racially mixed heritage are protagonists or heroines; a family unit, either extended, altered, or reconfigured, remains; nothing is absolute; change is necessary, and balance, essential (Davidson & Wagner-Martin1995:143).

Octavia Butler's writing has a solid reputation among readers and writers. Williams (1987) noted that her work has a "cult status among many black women readers…Butler's work has a scope that commands a wide audience" (Matthews2006:582). She has written many books as examples of the best that science fiction has to offer. Speaking of *Kindred* and *Wild Seed* Pfeifffer argued that with these books Butler "produced two novels of such special excellence that critical appreciation of them will take several years to assemble. To miss them will be to miss unique novels in modern fiction" (*Ibid*.). Easton (2000:138) asserted that with *Dawn* "Butler has gifted SF with a vision of possibility more original than anything we have seen since Arthur C] Clarke's *Childhood's End.*" Butler's novels deserve more recognition because they fill a void in the science fiction genre, which often neglects to explore sexual, familial, and racial relationships. Forster in the 1982s issue of *Extrapolation* argues: "Since Octavia Butler is a black

woman who writes speculative fiction which is primarily concerned with social relationships, where rulers include women and nonwhites …the neglect of her work is startling." For her part, Butler did not discount the unique place she occupies as a black female science-fiction writer, but she had no wish to be typecast by her race or gender, or even by her genre. A reviewer on the *Voices from the Gap(2003)* Website quoted Butler as saying, "Every story I write adds to me a little, changes me a little, forces me to re-examine an attitude or belief, causes me to research and learn, helps me to understand people and grow….Every story I create creates me. I write to create myself." Butler has brought a unique perspective to the genre of science fiction, usually the domain of white male writers. As an African American woman, she is attentive to issues of gender, race, and social class. However, she did not view these narrowly as black/white or male/female relationships but extended these explorations to include differences in sexual orientation and even extraterrestrial/human relationships. A consistent motif in her work is her interest in family relationships, especially the painful experiences of her women characters who must choose between their own desires and the needs of loved ones. Her attention to character development and her inquiry into the moral choices that confront humanity at the beginning of the twenty-first century is quite noteworthy. Butler has dramatized the complex interaction among the past, present, and future, seeing the acceptance of difference and tolerance for others as a condition for the survival of the human race. Butler gives voice to the voiceless, vision to the visionless. Rather, she has provided vision of a millennial world. Sandi Russell (1992: 170) rightly comments: "The new, as well as the old, are given voice in the works of the science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler….All [her] books are concerned with new societies where equality reigns and the hierarchies of race and religion are abolished." By and Large, the science fiction as presented by Octavia Butler by recasting the past for future has forged a path for the progress of the third world societies in general and the progress of the minority groups, women, subalterns, the oppressed and the downtrodden in particular.

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